



AN INSIGHT INTO THE VERY FIRST BENGALI LANGUAGE TEXT BOOKS: A VISUAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT

Bengali children's literature has experienced considerable evolution in its journey from oral traditions of the past to the modern age of technology. From various fables, riddles and poems found in the rich oral tradition of Bengal, to the latest publications in the format of DVD's and CD's, the medium of this body of literature has also transformed the content down the ages. Bengali text books that introduce the alphabet to young readers have also been richly informed by this knowledge corpus. The authors of these text books were amongst the most important social cognoscenti, contributing significantly to further the cause of education in contemporary Bengal. However, several of their efforts (mostly print publications) have been often criticized by historians and sociologists in recent times to have been only limited to the Presidency town of Kolkata during colonial times. Nevertheless, more than a hundred years after the printing of the first textbook in Bengali by Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the modern market including the internet, is flooded with various Bengali text books, which are all based on these initial efforts. It is also important to note that despite, or perhaps due to, the above criticisms, these textbooks have reached out to a much wider audience over the years in rural as well as urban India. Online availability of such works has further expanded this reach. In the process, text books have also acted as repositories of fables, chharas or poems, and stories from the oral traditions of Bengal. Even the new Bengali text books by various authors often tend to borrow themes, characters, poems, and stories from the old ones, rendering an aspect of continuity amidst changing environments. This paper is an attempt to understand the significant efforts of literate pundits of Sanskrit and Bengali in West Bengal towards the spread of the Bengali language through these text books, and the use of oral traditions in these efforts. The present paper has been aided by extensive fieldwork across one and a half decades in various districts of the state of West Bengal, conducted to understand the reach and use of these textbooks across urban as well as rural spaces.

Keywords: Bengali alphabet, text books, oral tradition, survival, continuity

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INTRODUCTION

Khukurani khukurani korchho tumi ki
Ei dekhona kemon ami chhobi ekenchhi
(O little girl, what are you up to?)

Come and see what a lovely drawing I have
made)¹

In the typical high-pitched childish tone, the widely known words poured out of a village primary school in the interiors of Bankura district (West Bengal) as children memorized the Bengali alphabet. With the bell finally signaling lunch-hour, the hubbub suddenly came to a halt as the scurrying bunch of students hastily put away their Hanshi Khushi by Jogindranath Sarkar and ran out into the portico to have the mid-day meal provided by the school. The sudden silence in the classroom echoed with the presence of a tradition that has a history of more than a hundred years. Several months later, as my five year old niece started her Bengali education at her English medium school in the heart of the metropolitan city of Kolkata (West Bengal) in her first standard, I was a witness once again to a similar picture, as she sat loudly revising her Bengali alphabet from Sahaj Path of Rabindranath Tagore.

Times have changed and over a hundred and ten years have passed since the introduction of the first Bengali text book to introduce the alphabets to children. What was initially restricted largely to efforts of enlightenment amidst educated and intellectual circles of West Bengal, has gradually trickled down to every segment of society, touching the lives of thousands over the past century. At present, the same set of text books feature amongst the highest selling text books in both hard and soft copy formats. It is significant to note that most of the new text books also borrow heavily from traditional text books—lauding once again the efforts of yesteryears. This paper is an attempt to understand the significant efforts of literate pundits of Sanskrit

and Bengali in West Bengal towards the spread of the Bengali language through these text books, and the use of oral traditions in these efforts.

TRACING THE PATH

The first Bengali text book was produced more than a century ago, through the efforts of Sanskrit Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Hailing from the village of Birshingha (in the district of West Mednipur in West Bengal), Vidyasagar was born on September 26, 1820. An intelligent and ardent student, his persistent quest for knowledge resulted in many reform movements in Bengal,² including ones for widow remarriage and expansion of education. He continued the efforts towards expanding education in West Bengal started by Raja Rammohan Roy. One of his most major contributions to the Bengali language was *Barna Parichay* (Know Your Alphabet), a picture textbook explaining the basics of Bengali language with visual aids for better understanding. The maestro's intellect and persona have been captured in a simple sentence of the famous poet and author Michael Madhusudan Dutta: "The genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman, and the heart of a Bengali mother" (as cited in Datta 2006, p. 693). Vidyasagar gave his countrymen a language that was "easy and beautiful, backed by a faultless Bengali grammatical structure which did not need Sanskritic props" mentioned Amaresh Datta (2006, p. 693), who also spoke about the "lucidity in explanation and the expression through patriotic flavour" which rendered the textbooks an exceptional character. Vidyasagar mostly wrote text books for children, including *Barna Parichay* (Know Your Alphabet), *Kathamala* (Book of Fables— from Aesop's fables), *Bodhodaya* (Dawn of Knowledge), and *Akhyanmanjari* (Collection of Stories).

Barna Parichay starts with explaining the Bengali alphabet – both *Swar Barna*

(consonants) and *Byanjan Barna* (vowels), through introducing simple words with two, three, four and five letters, along with *Juktakkhor*³ (conjugants to further modify each letter into various other forms of letters). The popularity of this age-old text book is evident from the various characters and essays which are still frequently used as popular Bengali proverbs. This is especially true for two stories written about two boys in *Barna Parichay* part 1, in simple words without complicated pronunciation and conjugants. The two boys are Gopal and Rakhal who have, down the years, almost become synonymous with disciplined and undisciplined children in Bengal. The beginning sentences of both the essays have laid the foundation for this:

Gopal baro subodh. Tar baap ma jakhon ja bolen, se tai korey. Ja pai tai khai, ja pai tai porey....

(Gopal is a good boy. He always listens to his father and mother. He eats and wears whatever is given to him...)

Gopal jemon subodh, Rakhal temon noi. Se baap maar kotha shoney na, ja kushi tai korey, sara din utpat korey, chhoto bhai bhaginigulir sahit jhagra o maramari korey....

(Rakhal is not as good as Gopal. He never listens to his father and mother, he always does what he wants to, he acts naughty all day long, he fights with his younger siblings and beats them up...).

Barna Parichay part 2 explains conjugants in detail with their various usages. The textbook maintains its tradition of borrowing messages from oral traditions of Bengal and in the process, imparts a strong civic and social message. Though complex with the explanation of conjugants and their usages, *Barna Parichay* part 2 never lacked popular characters and phrases, including the opening words of the book; *Oikka, Bakko, Manikko* (list of words, explaining the significance of the use of the conjugant hasanto denoted by

the mark “~”). Of the most popular characters in the book is that of Bhuvan who still stands as an example of the consequences of undisciplined behavior, conveying a strong message about the terrible habit of stealing. Bhuvan, the main character of the story, gets into the habit of stealing items from friends at school. With both parents being deceased, he used to reside with his maternal aunt. Though the aunt knew about it, she never taught him the simple lesson of life: ‘stealing is bad’. Bhuvan grew up to be a notorious thief and finally was arrested. On the day he was about to be hanged for his crimes, he called his aunt and in an act of whispering into her ear, bit it off. The message was that if she had stopped him on time, he would have been a different person and not standing on the death roll. The story is still repeated in urban and rural Bengal amidst the young and old alike, emphasizing the importance of truthfulness, sincerity and honesty, and acts of punishment in time and whenever needed.

The moral significance of *Barna Parichay* also resonates in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore as his first association with formal Bengali education was through Vidyasagar’s text book, following a short series of oral lessons on Ramayana, Mahabharata, Thakurmar Jhuli,⁴ etc., under the auspices of his home tutor Madhab Pundit (Tagore 2005). Tagore explains that *Barna Parichay* and his vivid childhood imagination also helped him to perceive Vidyasagar’s writings as “*Adi kobir adi kobita*” (the ancient writings of an ancient poet) (Ibid), which he took pride in exploring on his own.

Vidyasagar’s efforts showed the way for other works which attempted to create a means by which to understand the Bengali alphabet through visual aid. The word ‘edutainment’ was still unknown then, and so was the idea of creating a technique of learning for pre-primary education. However, each of these efforts contributed towards creating such

a framework, and encouraged many more similar efforts. Almost all of the examples in these books derived from the oral traditions of Bengal. The initial efforts started with rhymes, fables, stories and anecdotes that portrayed Bengal in its various socio-cultural milieus. For instance, Madanmohan Tarkalankar's⁵ (1880) *Shishu Shiksha* (Child's Reader) became quite famous and amongst the many poems, one is still remembered by all:

Pakhi sab kore rab rati pohailo

*Kanoney kusum koli sakali phutilo...*⁶

(The birds sing, signaling the end of the night
The buds blossomed in the garden...)

Thereafter, there were many attempts to collect and accumulate and print children's fables and lores, namely Akshay Kumar Datta's *Charu Path* (1853) which was published in three parts and was one of the earliest examples of exploring popular science for children; Rev. Lal Behari Dey's (1824) publication of *Folktales of Bengal*, which was later translated in 1978 by Lila Majumdar, which also spoke of oral traditions, especially for children; Rangalal Bandopadhyay and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Surodhuni Kavya* (first part appeared in 1871, second part appeared in 1876), which presented a collection of verses for children; *Padyamala* of Manamohan Basu (publications between 1880-1900), and the works of Dinesh Chandra Sen (publications between 1896-1940) as well as Dakkhinranjan Mitra Majumdar (1907) (as cited in Datta 2006), all of which are valuable documents today for the study of folktales of Bengal. However, these were mainly limited to simple collection and documentation of folktales from the oral tradition.

However, with the publication of Jogindranath Sarkar's (1891) *Hanshi O Khela* (Laughter and Play), children's literature was ushered into a new era. Mentions Amaresh Datta, (2006, p. 693), "*Hanshi O Khela* was the first to break away from the class-room tradition and was

solely for the pleasure it would give to children. What the child would incidentally learn was an extra benefit." Soon in 1897, Sarkar's *Hanshi Khushi* was published and as mentions Datta, "mastering the letters became a jolly game for children. *Hanshi Khushi* changed the whole face of primary education. It was a pleasure for children to read and behold the countless rhymes, drawings and sketches of this book" (Ibid). The two volumes of Sarkar's *Hanshi Khushi* introduce the Bengali alphabet including vowels and consonants, as well as various other aspects of spelling.

Sahaj Path of Rabindranath Tagore followed shortly after. Tagore mentioned in *Sahaj Path* that his writings for children were founded upon the ideal of simple education for the holistic development of one's mind and character. In his attempts, Tagore was also greatly influenced by his elementary education from his days of home-schooling through the books of Vidyasagar including *Barna Parichay*, and the books by Jogindranath Sarkar at a later stage – whom he referred to as Bangla *Shishusahityer Bhagirath* (the pioneer of Bengali children's literature). Inspired thus, 1930 saw in print Tagore's efforts towards the spread of Bengali education amidst the young and old with the publication of *Sahaj Path* parts 1 and 2 and *Patha Parichay* parts 1 and 2. Similar efforts for the spread of English education took form in the shape of *Ingreji Sahaj Siksha* parts 1 and 2. Among these, *Sahaj Path* (all the volumes) was particularly popular. Today one would find that finding a copy of *Sahaj Path* is easy still very easy while others, not so much. The text was added an extra dash by famous artist Nandalal Bose who was also credited with introducing a new form of painting and sketching with strong inspiration and influence from rural and traditional styles and forms of art. His work was positioned in time during the so-called Bengal renaissance at the time of the Bengal Partition Movement from 1905-1911. He was also a close associate, friend,

and fellow colleague at Tagore's university at Shantiniketan – Vishwa Bharati.

Though in between there have been several publications related to children's literature, they were mostly related to the narrating of stories, poems, fables, and lore. Hardly any of them concentrated on introducing the basics of learning namely the alphabet, vowels and consonants, and the Bengali numerical. With escalating inspiration for better portrayal of culture and society as the region of Bengal witnessed flourishing works of art and literature, improved technology aided the process towards a faster reach to the specific target audiences. The improved technology of publication brought over by Upendrakishore Raychowdhury from England was also put to use to bring closer to children, the stories of yore from the very nooks and crannies of rural Bengal. The efforts of Raychowdhury led to the popular distribution of Bengali animal fables and folktales, including such treasure as *Tuntuni o bagher katha* (The story of the tailor bird and the tiger), *Dhurto shiyal o Brahman* (The sly fox and the Brahman), *Boka kumir o dhurto shiyal* (The stupid crocodile and the sly fox), *tuntuni o rajamoshai* (The tailor bird and the king), etc. Several decades later, almost all of these stories were translated into various languages, including English. Many of these have also been staged as children's plays across the globe in popular theatres in various languages.

The visual appeal of Bengali children's textbooks kept improving from the times of *Barna Parichay* which concentrated more on the text rather than any degree of entertainment. Later attempts, including Jogindranath's *Hanshi Khushi* and *Hanshi O Khela*, had texts accompanied by rich visual appeal for beginners. All the attempts of Upendrakishore, followed by his son Sukumar Ray (known for his Bengali limericks), also were accompanied by strong visual appeal with detailed drawings of animals, humans as

well as imaginary characters, bringing to life the very essence of edutainment. This is also one of the reasons for the immediate success of *Sahaj Path*. The drawing skills of Nandalal Bose added a special fervor to the new attempt and the result was an everlasting and evergreen series of books with characters that have come to constitute regular conversations in the typical Bengali household even today. With time and down the passage of history, the accompanied visuals are arranged and presented more meaningfully from a psychosocial understanding of a child's mind. Thus, what started in *Barna Parichay* may not appeal to the modern child, but the recent publications and editions of the same text book take into account the very fact, and presents visuals in a manner that appeals to the target audience of contemporary children. They are simpler to explain with reference to layout and in terms of colour, patterns, and sketches, as compared to their older counterparts. This is true for other age-old text books as well, including *Hanshi Khushi* and *Sahaj Path*. On the other hand, often it is noticed that the age-old visuals/drawings are etched in the memories of adults ushering childhood memories in, and breathing a continuity of tradition. For this section of the spill-over target audience, these visuals have less appeal in comparison to the old pictures they have grown up with.

VALUES ESPOUSED AND REVIVAL OF THE RURAL IN EARLY TEXTBOOKS

As the text books helped to carry forward the initial spirit of introducing the Bengali language to beginner's more than a century ago, they also resulted in maintaining the continuity of oral traditions in Bengal. Starting from the very first text book for young readers, *Barna Parichay* by Vidyasagar, the method of expression took to following the patterns of oral traditions, including the moral lessons delivered through them. In essence, the morals espoused thus revolve around the value of discipline, education, honesty,

sincerity, obedience, and respect for elders in the family (especially parents), providing a holistic development for young minds.

These stories contained in the textbooks reflect a folk-urban relationship in which the folk tradition is often referred to as the 'good example' of a society whose lessons are to be learned and taken to the heart, bringing to mind Oscar Lewis's reference to the "folk concept" as an "ideal type and hence a matter of definition." (as cited in Miner 1952, p. 531). Drawing from the folk traditions as they do, Bengali children's textbooks use an abundance of poems, riddles, anecdotes, and stories from rural oral Bengal. Thus, we have alphabets in *Barna Parichay* speaking of *ektara* (a single-stringed musical instrument popularly used by the rustic and vagabond musician artists of Bengal – the Bauls), *Rishi* (a vagabond monk), and *janta* (a pestle and quern which is mostly used to powder crops like rice, millet, jowar, bajra, corn, etc.). Though Vidyasagar functioned from his office at Fort William College and Sanskrit College in Kolkata, the frequent mention of *pathshala* (elementary school in villages) in all the essays of *Barna Parichay* parts 1 and 2, brings to mind the significance associated with the traditional form of education with a *guru-sisya parampara*⁷ which was the basic inspiration and ethos of *pathshala* establishments in Bengal as well as in many other parts of India. Still later books like Jogindranath Sarkar's *Hanshi Khushi* also borrowed heavily from the traditional rural ethos.

Thus, the explanation of the poem of *Haradhaner Dashti Chhele* (Haradhan's Ten Sons) in both parts 1 and 2 of *Hanshi Khushi* reverberates with the essence of rural life with the mention of such words and themes as forest, tiger, village huts, fishermen, boat-rides, and wood-cutter, amidst others. These examples on the one hand bring to life objects and bits and pieces of life which are away from the din of Kolkata. On the other, they

also help perpetuate the presence of rural Bengal in the city through these text books. Some examples include:

Aye re aye tiye

Naye bhora diye

Na niye gelo boyal machhey

Ta dekhey dekhey bhondor nachey

Ore bhondor phirey cha

Khokar nachon dekhey ja

(Come hither o parrot

In a boat

The boat was taken away by boal fish

Seeing which the badger started dancing

O badger look around

And see how my little boy is dancing)

Or

Bansboner kachhey

Bhunroshiyali nachey

Tar gonfjorati paka

Mathay kanak-chanpa

(Near the bamboo thicket

Dances the fat-bellied fox

He has large whiskers

And a yellow champa flower on his head)

(from Jogindranath Sarkar's *Hanshi Khushi* part 1)

In a similar manner, several of Tagore's characters from his text books are still popular among both rural and urban children, including:

Chhoto khoka bole a aa

Shekheni shey kotha koaoa

(The little baby has just learned his first letters- 'a' and 'aa'

And he is yet to learn to speak)

(Sahaj Path part 1 1930)

Or else other poems describing a typical village environment:

Naam tar motibil

Bahu dur jal

*Haans guli bheshe bheshe korey kolahol...*⁸

(The name of the rivulet is Motibil which is a wide one

The ducks float and create a lot of din ...)

(Ibid)

As well as another similarly popular poem referring to a river in a village:

Amader chhoto nodi chaley ankey bankey

*Boisakh mashey taar hantu jal thakey...*⁹

(Our little river runs in and out of nooks and crannies

During the dry summer months, it has only knee-deep water...)

(Ibid)

The contributions of Upendrakishore Raychowdhury and later on his son Sukumar Ray during the Bengal renaissance movement and the Bengal Partition Movement (1905-1911) also deserve special mention. Their writings borrow heavily from oral traditions of Bengal, which has helped to reconstruct education for both young and old in the traditional Bengali language. Upendrakishore's various characters – both humans and animals from fables, including the stories of *Tuntuni Aar Baagh* (The tailor bird and the tiger), *Boka Jola* (The stupid weaver) and *Tuntuni Aar Raja* (The tailor bird and the king) – still feature amidst the most popular children's books, and have enjoyed popular reception the world over. These stories are also available in the form of Bengali comic books for children. None of the books by Upendrakishore were textbooks, but they nevertheless served to illustrate social behavioural norms.

Bhattacharji (2006, p.3) speaks of the significance of children's literature that borrows heavily from oral traditions. She describes the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* folktales of India as ones with "simple narratives and

repetitive elements-reminiscent of its oral past with anthropomorphic characters". She also refers to Indian folktales as being political or allegorical with religious, pagan or tribal elements and moral and psychological dimensions, often having an "elision between folklore and religious mythology" (Ibid).

POPULARITY

The popularity of these old text books in present times is evident through the widespread translations of the stories, poems, anecdotes, and phrases in them, most notably including several of Raychowdhury's stories and also *Barna Parichay*, *Sahaj Path*, *Abol Tabol* and *Hanshi Khusi*. The availability of same on the internet also ensures greater distribution among a wider audience comprising all ages across all socio-economic divides. Some such commonly available children's text books include:

Bhasha-Jijnasa 1 (7th edn.) (Bengali), Vidyasagar Pustak Mandir

Bhasha-Jijnasa 2 (8th edn) (Bengali), Vidyasagar Pustak Mandir

Bhasha-Jijnasa 3 (with Ganesh Basu; 8th edn.) (Bengali) Vidyasagar Pustak Mandir

Khushir Byakaran (Bengali), Vidyasagar Pustak Mandir

Bhasha-Sarit-Sagar (with Ganesh Basu) (Bengali), Vidyasagar Pustak Mandir (publication of 21-24 has since been discontinued).

Byakaraner Hasikhushi (Bengali), Educational Forum

Bhasha Parichay 1 (3rd edn.) (Bengali), Educational Forum

Bhasha Parichay 2 (3rd edn.) (Bengali), Educational Forum

Madhyamik Bhasha Sandhan (4th edn.) (Bengali), Educational Forum

Akademi Banan Abhidhan (with others, 6th edn.) (Bengali), Paschimbanga Bangla Akademi

Wordmaster English-English-Bangla Dictionary, (Bangla component, 2009) (Bengali and English), Orient Blackswan.

Haste Haste Ingriji (8th edn.) (Bengali), Shishu Sahitya Samsad (Easy English)

Eso Ingriji Shikhi 1 (2nd edn. 2009) (Bengali), Shishu Sahitya Samsad (Easy English)

Eso Ingriji Shikhi 2 (2nd edn., 2009) (Bengali), Shishu Sahitya Samsad (Easy English)

Haste Haste Banan (7th edn.) (Bengali), Shishu Sahitya Samsad (Bangla spelling in rhymes)

It is significant to note that these works feature amidst the best-selling Bengali text books of contemporary times. In fact, present day works tend to have titles strongly resembling those of the old ones. For instance, *Hashi Khushi*- a reminiscent of Jogindranath Sarkar's *Hanshi Khushi*, Esho Ingriji Sikhi- reminding one of Tagore's *Ingriji Sahaj Sikkha*- parts 1 and 2, and also the mention of Vidyasagar – a reminiscent of the association of the maestro with education and its importance. Though in a market lens this may appear as a marketing strategy to accelerate sales by associating the product with a successful previous product, it also bears testimony to the huge popularity of these works, most of which was published more than a century back. Thus, one often sees mugs, t-shirts, sarees, shawls, bags, pen-stands, pencil boxes, etc. with motifs borrowed from Nandalal Bose's creations in Rabindranath Tagore's *Sahaj Path*. Modern *puja pandals* of West Bengal during the time of *Navratri* or *Durga Puja*¹⁰ also accommodate themes borrowed from old Bengali text books, including *Sahaj Path*, *Barna Parichay*, and *Hanshi Khushi*.

CONCLUSION

The present paper was an attempt to understand the significant efforts of literate pundits of Sanskrit and Bengali in West Bengal towards the spread of the Bengali language through these text books, and the use of oral traditions in these efforts. To this end, it discussed the development of Bengali children's textbooks, the socio-cultural significance of such works, and the popularity they enjoy even today (in an attempt to illustrate their relevance across time and space). The paper observed that most of the content of these books has been drawn from oral traditions, and as such, they have also partially functioned as repositories of knowledge on rural Bengal. Aided by extensive fieldwork across one and a half decades in various districts of the state of West Bengal, the paper observed that the popularity and public reception of these works still remains the same, resulting in several new entries to assume names that are very similar to the old ones.

As these publications still occupy a favourable place among the young and old, transcription of the oral tradition they draw from has been contemplated many times over. As scholars from various disciplines of the Social Sciences argue about the effects of transcription on the spontaneous creation of folklore, the same has also been often accepted by many other scholars due to reasons like the preservation of lost data, wider distribution among the masses and scholars for a better understanding and knowledge of the subject and in the process, popularizing oral traditions, etc. However, to discuss the matter in detail would require a separate topic, and therefore is best suited for future research papers in the discipline. What can be emphasized for now is the need to spread the morals and values of these early texts as widely as possible through a sustainable and effective expansion of primary education.

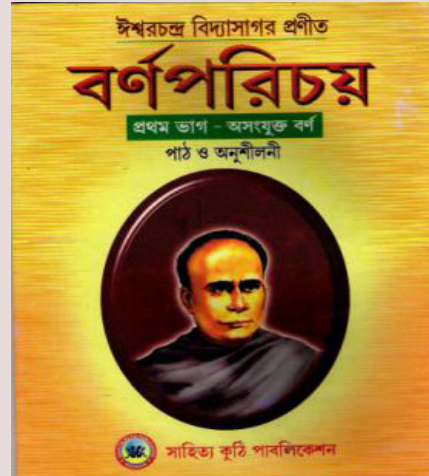
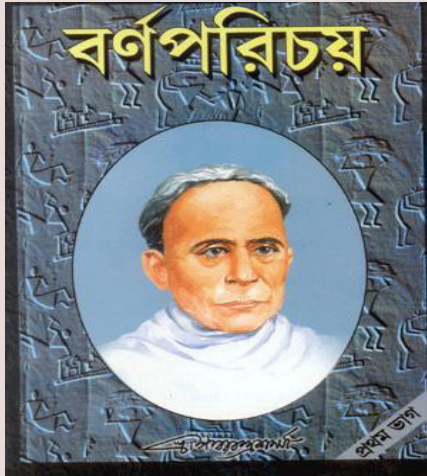


Fig. 1- Cover of *Barna Parichay* parts-1 and 2 by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Both editions are by two different publishers of recent times. With the copyright period over long back, the book is being published by various publishers and distributors in Bengal. (Source- personal collection of author)

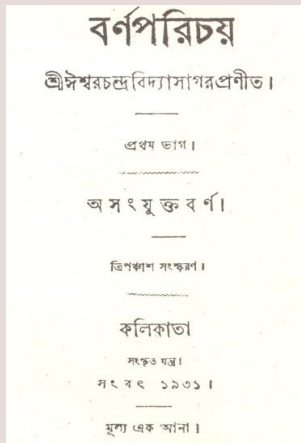


Fig. 2- The front page of *Barna Parichay*-Part 1, 1931 and 53rd edition when the cost of the book was 1 *anna*. The edition marks the popularity of the text book. (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 3- The story of *Bhuvan*: An illustration from a recent publication (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 4- Bengali alphabets with illustration (vowels or *Swar Barna*)- from a recent publication of *Barna Parichay*- part 1 (Source- personal collection of author)



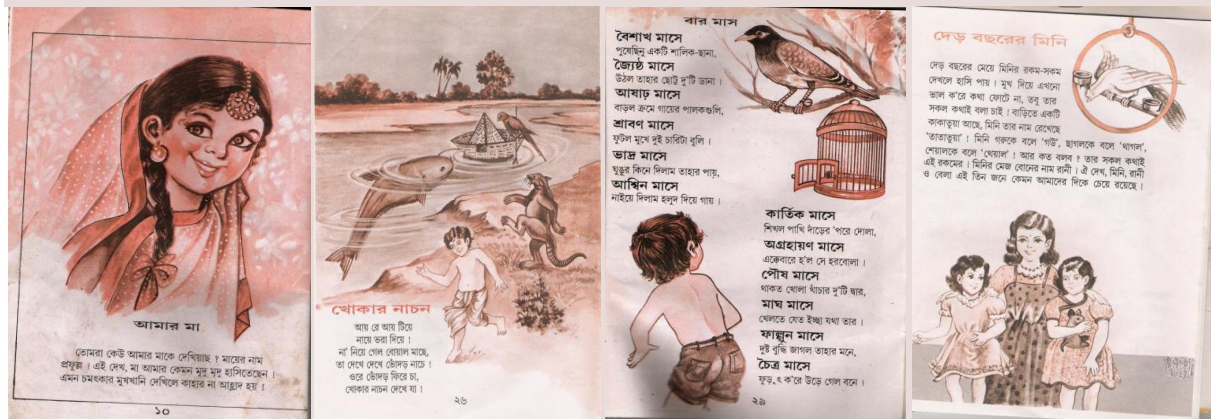
Fig. 5- Short sentences with illustrations- from a recent publication of *Barna Parichay* part 1 (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 6- *Swar Barna* (vowels) from *Hanshi Khushi* part 1 shows the popular phrase *Oi ajogar aschhe fere* (The python comes chasing), followed by other short poems. Each one of these is still popular as proverbs and anecdotes. (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 7- The popular rhyme- *Khukurani* from *Hanshi Khushi* part 1 (Source- personal collection of author)



Aamar ma
(My mother)

Aye re aye tiye (Come
hither o parrot)

Baro mash (12
months)

Der bochhorer Mini
(one and a half year
old Mini)

Fig. 8- Popular essays, rhymes and proverbs from *Hanshi Khushi* part 1, strongly influenced by the oral tradition of Bengal. The poem *Aye re aye tiye* is a popular nursery rhyme. (Source- personal collection of author)

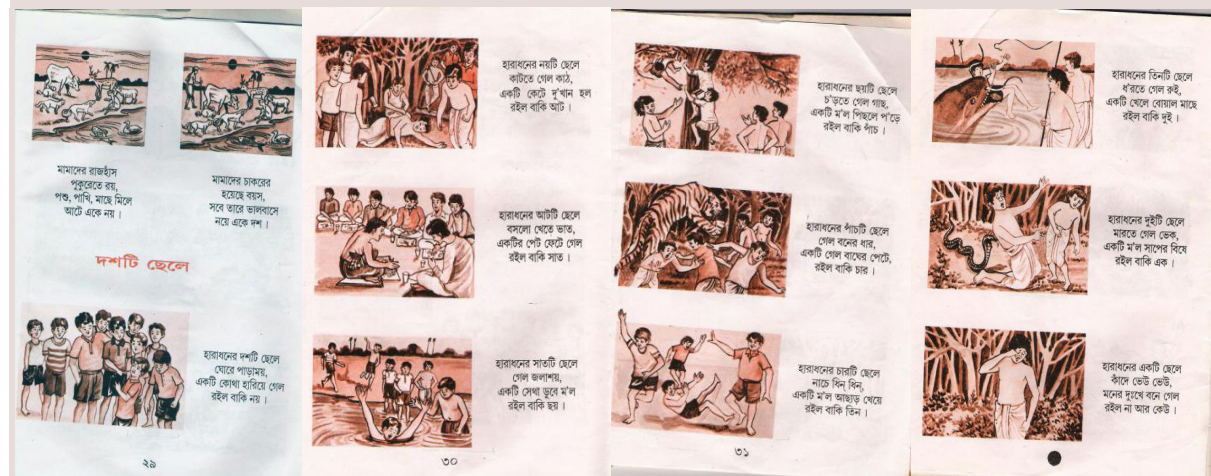


Fig. 9- *Haradhoner dashti chheley* (Haradhon's ten sons) from *Hanshi Khushi* part 1. The poem that primarily teaches subtraction is still a favourite amongst both young and old alike. (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 910 Upendrakishore Roychowdhury son- Sukumar Ray (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 11- Sketch by Roychowdhury (from the animal fable *Boka Brahman Aar dhurto shiyal* [The stupid Brahman and the sly fox]) (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 12- Cover of a recent publication of Raychowdhury's stories on *tuntuni pakhi* or the tailor bird (Source- personal collection of author)

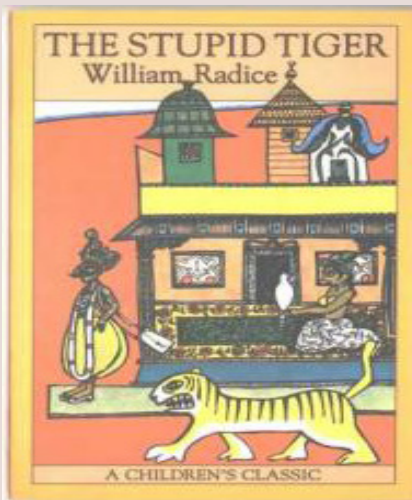


Fig. 13- English translated versions of Raychowdhury's *Boka bagh* (Stupid Tiger) and *Jolar biye* (Weaver's wedding). Both feature amongst popular best-sellers on the internet. (Source- personal collection of author)



An opera based on a Bengali animal fable by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri
 Translated and adapted by William Radice
 Music by Bernard Hughes, Directed by David Bass
THIS WORK WAS COMMISSIONED BY THE W11 CHILDREN'S OPERA TRUST
 The first fully-staged performances were at the Britten Theatre,
 Royal College of Music, on December 9th and 10th, 2006
 The Weaver's Wedding is a story of a clever Jackal who arranges the marriage of a foolish Weaver to the King's daughter - who really changes his life.
 Performed by two intergenerational casts for audiences of all ages. See when your friends are performing!
 Saturday, March 28th
 Sunday, March 29th
 Saturday, April 4th
 Sunday, April 5th 3:00 and 7:00 PM
 2:00 and 6:00 PM
 3:00 and 7:00 PM
 2:00 and 6:00 PM Tickets: \$10 for adults, \$5 for children
 24-hour ticket hotline: 1-800-838-3006
 Order Tickets Now: by mail or online
 The Andrew Peabody School
 70 Rindge Ave
 Cambridge, MA 02140
 For more information or group sales: call 617-492-4095 or email Tickets09@FamilyOpera.org

Fig. 14- An online advertisement about an English play by children based on an adapted and translated work by Raychowdhury in English - *Weaver's Wedding* by William Radice (retrieved from <http://www.familyopera.org/drupal/node/33>)



Fig. 15- A young Rabindranath Tagore (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 16- Drawings by Nandalal Bose in Rabindranath Tagore's *Sahaj Path*, which are even popular in present times. This is from a recent Vishwa Bharati edition. Each of the drawings from the text book are famous. (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 17- The same poems by Tagore from another edition of *Sahaj Path* by a publisher, other than Vishwa Bharati. The drawings of Nandalal Bose are replaced with simpler, more modern sketches. Only the text remains the same. With the expiry of copyrights of Vishwa Bharati, the texts have been adapted by various other publishers in recent times. (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 18- Notebooks and mugs with motifs borrowed from Nandalal Bose's creations for *Sahaj Path*. (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 19- Durga Puja *pandal* decoration in Kolkata, with borrowed motifs from Nandalal Bose's creations for *Sahaj Path* (Source- personal collection of author)



Fig. 20- Two examples of modern Bengali text books strongly influenced by *Sahaj Path*, *Barna Parichay* and *Hanshi Khushi* (Source- personal collection of author)

NOTES

1. From Jogindranath Sarkar's *Hanshi Khushi* part
2. Vidyasagar's *Barna Parichay* was the first book on the modern Bengali alphabet. The term *Barna* means letters (of the alphabet) and *Parichay* means introduction. He worked relentlessly to help frame several laws to improve the socio-cultural conditions of women, children, as well as education in contemporary India- especially in relation to *Bidhoba Vivah* (widow remarriage), *Bahu Vivah* (banning of polygamy), and *Balya Vivah* (on the flaws of child marriage).
3. The Bengali script has been derived from the other written systems of the Indian subcontinent such as the Eastern *Nagari* script and *Devanagari* script. In Bengali script, vowel graphemes are diacritics attached to its consonant graphemes,

and therefore not independent letters. It is written from left to right. It is interesting to also note its similarity of property with *Devanagari* script (used in Hindi, Marathi and Nepali) and *Gurumukhi* (used for Punjabi) in reference to the *matra*, a distinctive horizontal line that links the letters together along their tops.

4. *Thakurmar Jhuli* or Grandmother's Bag of Tales (1907) is a collection of Bengali folk tales from various parts of undivided Bengal- including the present day country of Bangladesh. The compilation and publication was done by Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar more than a hundred years back towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century (1907). Mitra Majumdar is also credited with subsequent publication of compiled folktales from various parts of Bengal- all of which are regarded as excellent assets of literature and oral tradition in present times.

5. He was the son of Ramdhan Chattopadhyay of Bilwagram in Nadia district of West Bengal. He was also the class-mate of Ishwar Chandra Vidysagar at Sanskrit College, Kolkata, and later studied at Hindu College. A talented student, he was liked by his teachers for his diligent efforts and exceptional poetic talents, and was conferred the title of *Kabyaratnakar* by his teachers and professors. The title of *Tarkalankar* was conferred by his friends. His poetic masterpieces while he was a student include *Rasatarangini* (1834) and *Vidyaratna* (1834). During his work, he taught at the Fort William College and Krishnanagar College, before joining the Sanskrit College as professor of literature in 1846. Later on, he joined the civil service as judge-Pandit in 1855 in the district of Murshidabad in present West Bengal, and was promoted as deputy magistrate in the same year. However, his work with furthering the cause of Bengali and Sanskrit education continued, resulting in the establishment of a printing press in Kolkata and the subsequent publication of many old Bengali and Sanskrit. In respect to education, it is important to mention his contribution towards the cause of women's education as reflected in his contributions towards Bethune Girl's School (Kolkata). This school was a landmark in 19th century women's education in Kolkata, when the elite and the middle class never sent their daughters to school. This was achieved with the help of John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, Dakkhinarnjan Mitra Majumdar, and Ramgopal Ghosh. As Tarkalankar taught at the school without any remuneration, his *Sishu Siksha* (completed in three parts) was completed, informed largely by his work on women's education. The book was composed for the school, and his two daughters- Kundamala and Bhubanmala, who were amongst the first students of the school. (Madan Mohan Tarkalankar n.d.).

6. *Pakhi sab karey rab rati pohailo*
Kanoney kusum koli shakoli phutilo
Rakhal gorur pal loye jai mathey
Shishugon dei mon nijo nijo pathey
Phutilo maloti phul saurabh chhutilo
Parimol lobhey oli asiya jutilo
Gaganey uthilo rabi lohit baran
Alok paiya lok pulokito mon
Shitol batas boy juray shorir
Patay patay porey nishir shishir
Utho shishu mukh dhou poro nijo besh
Apon pathetey mon koroho nibesh

Prabhat (Early Morning) by Madanmohan Tarkalankar

The birds sing, signaling the end of the night
The buds blossom in the garden
The cowherd takes out his herd to the fields
Kids concentrate on their studies
The malati flower blossom,
spreading its essence all around
Bees gather for honey
The sun rise with a redolent hue
Everybody is delighted with the sunlight
The cool early-morning breeze satisfies the soul
The late night dew drops gather on leafs
Wake up o little kid and wash your face
And sit down to concentrate on your studies

from Chhotoder Chhara-Kobita Sangraha part II - edited by Pritha Baul (2004).

7. *Pathshala* is the ancient Indian tradition of maintaining a formal scholarly relationship between student and teacher, which went beyond the parameters of schooling and included a holistic development for the student's growth, especially in his formative years. This has also been vividly described in the Vedas and was the dominant system of education in ancient India. In early RgVedic times, both girls and boys used to attend pathshalas, which later became limited to only boys in later RgVedic times. The system also required staying over at the residence of the teacher or guru for several years till the student, or more appropriately disciple or shishya, was ready to become an able citizen and honour all social responsibilities, and was also well versed with all ancient Indian texts- including the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and still in later times, the Aryanakas.

8. *Naam taar motibil, bahudur jal,*
Hansguli bheshey bheshey korey kolahol.
Pankey cheye thakey bok, chil udey choley,
Macchranga jhup ko'rey porey eshey joley.
Hetha hotha danga jagey, ghas diye dhaka,
Majhey majhey jolodhara choley ankabanka.
Kothao ba dhankhet joley adho doba,
Tari 'porey rod porey, ki ba taar shobha.
Dingy cho'rey ashey chashi, ketey loy dhan,
Bela geley ganye pherey geye shari gaan.
Mosh niye paar hoi rakhaler chheley,
Banshey bandha jaal niye macch dhorey jeley.
Megh choley bheshey bheshey akasher gaye,
Ghono shaolar dal jaley bheshey jai.

The name of the rivulet is Motibil which is a

wide one
 The ducks swim all across creating a din
 The crane looks into the mud, the kite flies
 overhead
 The kingfisher dives into water
 Little bits and pieces of land could be seen on
 both sides
 The water winds its way through them
 In places in between there are submerged rice
 fields
 They glisten in the sunlight
 The farmer comes in a dingy to harvest the
 field
 At the end of the day, he returns home with a
 song to his lips
 The bullockherd returns home with his herd
 The fishermen continues their day's catch with
 a net tied to bamboo poles,
 The clear clouds float across the sky
 Thick water hyacinths float down the water

Naam taar motibil- by Rabindranath Tagore-
 Sahaj Path part 1 (1930).

9. *Amader chhoto nadi choley bankebanke,
 Baisakh mashey taar hantu jal thakey.
 Paar hoye jai goru, paar hoye gaari,
 Dui dhar unchu taar, dhalu taar pari.
 Chik-chik korey bali, kotha nai kada,
 Ek dharey kash bon phuley phuley sada.
 Kichi-michi korey setha shaliker jhank,
 Raatey othey theke theke sheyaler hank.
 Aar-parey aam-bon taal-bon choley,
 Ganyer bamunpara tari chhaya toley.
 Tirey tirey chheley meye nahibar kaley
 Gamchhay jai bhori gaye tara dhaley.
 Shakaley bikaley kabhu naoa holey porey
 Ancholey chhankiya tara chhoto machh dhorey.
 Bali diye majey thala, ghotiguli majey,
 Bodhura kapor kechey jai griha kaajey.
 Asade badol namey, nodi bhoro-bhoro-
 Matia chhutia choley dhara khorotoro.
 Mahabege kal-kal kolahol othey,
 Gholo joley pakguli ghurey-ghurey chhotey.
 Dui kuley boney-boney po'rey jai shara,
 Barosar utsabey jegey othey para*

Our little river winds its way through
 In the hot Indian summer months, it has only
 knee-deep water
 Both cows and vehicles can easily move

across the river
 The sides are steep
 The banks shine with sand without a trace of
 mud
 On one side is a dense growth of white kaash
 flowers
 Various maynas twitter all day long
 At night, sometimes one can hear the foxes
 howl
 Then there is the mango grove, after which
 stands the palm grove
 The Brahmin para or locality of the village is
 spread under its shade
 From both the banks as children come to bathe
 They fill up their towels and pour all over them-
 selves
 After a bath every morning and evening
 They catch small fishes, straining the water
 with their thin clothes
 They scrub and clean pots and pans with the
 sand
 And then the housewives return to their respec-
 tive works after washing their clothes
 During the summer months, the rains come
 down with a fury, almost filling up the river
 The sands rush through the water and the
 sides get steeper
 The waters rush with ferocity
 As they twist and turn the mud and churn them
 and rush along
 On both the banks and across the vegetations
 and growths there arises a buzz
 The whole place enlivens up with the spirit of
 monsoon and rains.

Amader chhoto nadi- by Rabindranath Tagore-
 Sahaj Path part 1 (1930).

10. An annual *puja* during the Indian
 agricultural month of *Aswina* (September-
 October) to honour the freshly harvested crops
 and the Indian goddess- Devi Durga. The event is
 an occasion to pray to the deity for blessings for
 a bountiful harvest in the next season and is also
 an act of thanks for the recently harvested crops.
 Though the occasion of Navratri signifying nine
 nights is celebrated all over the nation with pomp
 and splendour, in Bengal the event is especially
 celebrated from the 6th day till the 10th and last day
 of the festival. This deity is popularly worshipped
 as Mahishasurmardini (the slayer of the demon
 called Mahishasur).

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